

HMONG NEW YEAR

and the
NIGHT MARKET

By Tara Gujadhur



Luang Prabang's Night Market is famous for its riot of colour and vast range of traditional handicrafts – everything from silver bracelets to hand-embroidered purses and quilts.

Today, the market encompasses hundreds of pavement stalls lining the main street every evening. But back in its earliest incarnation, it was just a handful of Hmong handicraft sellers, who came into the town in the evening to show and sell their wares to tourists. The offerings have since expanded to include local coffee, BeerLao t-shirts and elephant-printed pants. What used to be a valuable income opportunity for local female handicraft producers is now proving to be more difficult, with the influx of factory-made imports.

“Many of us support our families with this money, but now there are so many stalls and so many cheap products,” says Sia Yang, a Hmong handicraft producer and seller. Some Hmong sellers have

given in to the trend and started selling replicas, while others continue to make their painstakingly stitched purses and ornaments out of pride and persistence. During Hmong new year, these same tensions between the convenience and colour of manufactured clothing and the homage to tradition through handmade costumes can be seen.

The Hmong are one of the more famous ethnic groups in Laos; proud of their identity and protective of their culture, they have their own spoken and written language, and are the third largest ethnic group in Laos, about 9% of the population.

The group began migrating from southern China into Laos in the 19th century. They inhabit the northern and central parts of the country including Xiengkhouang, Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha, Xayaboury, Vientiane, and Bolikhamxay provinces. Today, they have a large overseas diaspora in the US, Australia, and even French Guiana, in South America.

The Hmong were once called the *Miao* or *Lao Soung*. *Lao Soung* means Lao of the mountaintops and was used by the government to refer to where the Hmong traditionally settled. However, this name is no longer official, and generally the Hmong prefer to be called by their ethnic group name. The Hmong are one of the larger

1. Hmong girl in traditional clothing
2. Hmong embroidery
3. Hmong girls working on their embroidery
4. Girls playing Hmong ball throwing game

Photos: Courtesy of the Traditional Arts & Technology Centre in Luang Prabang



groups living in Luang Prabang Province, and in mid-December, will be celebrating their new year, called *Nor Pe Chao*. At home, families will make rice cakes, present offerings to the ancestor spirits, and share meals with relatives and friends.

Celebrations last about 10 days and are held in a large field near town. There are many activities during this event, such as top-spinning games, arrow shooting contests, singing and dancing, and courtship games. Young

men and women wear colourful traditional clothing, in the

hopes of attracting a life partner. Visitors are welcome to attend, and can partake in photo booths with traditional clothes, play games, and watch local performances.

Hmong women are well known for their embroidery skills and batik cloth textiles. For Hmong batik, hemp cloth is etched with beeswax, then dyed with indigo. The beeswax is then

boiled off revealing a pattern in white. This cloth would be used to make skirts of the Mong Njua sub-group. Each group has their own traditional costume. Nowadays, the traditional clothing is worn only on special occasions like wedding ceremonies and New Year.

To learn more about the Hmong new year and the handmade crafts of Laos, visit the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang.



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